

GlobELT: An International Conference on Teaching and Learning English as an Additional Language, Antalya - Turkey

Multicultural challenges: Teaching Contemporary American Literature for Russian philological students

Olga Karasik^{a*}, Nadezhda Pomortseva^b

^aAssociate Professor, Department of World Literature, Kazan Federal University, Tatarstan Str., 2, Kazan 420021, Russian Federation

^bAssociate Professor, Department of European Languages and Cultures, Kazan Federal University, Pushkin Str., 1/55, Kazan 420008, Russian Federation

Abstract

Contemporary American literature is taught in Russian universities for philological students of different majors, but the methodical basis is still poor. The first fundamental research on Multiculturalism in American literature in Russia was made by M. Tlostanova. Her book *The Multicultural Debate and American Fiction of the Late 20th Century* was published in 2000. Since 14 years have passed, some statements made there are not urgent today. The only manual entitled *The US Multicultural Novel* was published by E. Butenina in 2013, but it doesn't cover all the necessary issues of the problem. Consequently, we as professors need a certain basis for teaching contemporary multicultural fiction. Professors face numerous challenges connected with multicultural paradigm as a part of the postmodern perception of the world. For effective teaching, it is necessary to take into consideration the students' knowledge and background. We chose the method of direct questioning and offered the students several questions about Multiculturalism and Postmodernism, both in the most general and literary meanings. The students have not studied any of contemporary literature, Postmodernism or Multiculturalism, yet and have no academic knowledge about them. Analyzing the answers we saw that, however, the cultural phenomena of Multiculturalism and Postmodernism are familiar to the students, they can hardly explain how they can be referred to literature. Carrying out this research, we believed that it would help us in teaching Multicultural American Literature in the future. Thus, we made important conclusions and gave the recommendations for the professors dealing with the subject.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Peer-review under responsibility of Hacettepe Üniversitesi.

Keywords: Postmodernism; Multiculturalism; American Literature; students' answers; teaching

* Corresponding author. Tel.: 9033416469; fax: +0-000-000-0000 .

E-mail address: karassik1@yandex.ru, okarasik@kpfu.ru

1. Introduction

Contemporary American Literature is taught in Russian universities today for all philological students, therefore on different levels and in different proportions. Mainly it is a part of the obligatory course of World Literature within the schedule of different majors: World Literature, Russian Literature, Regional Literature, Foreign Languages, Teaching Methods in Language and Literature, Translation, etc. For those whose major is English and Literature or World Literature, there are special courses of Contemporary American literature. It is also taught for graduate students. Though the discipline is widely presented, the methodological basis for it is still poor when we deal with Multiculturalism and the most contemporary tendencies in fiction. The fundamental researches on general problems of Multiculturalism are also very few in Russia today. The first and still the only big and serious book was published by Professor M. Tlostanova in 2000. It was her *The Multicultural Debate and American Fiction of the Late 20th Century*. Fourteen years have already passed since then, but it remains the most frequently quoted and mentioned book on the subject, though some statements made by the author are not urgent for today as the situation is changing quickly. The only manual entitled *The US Multicultural Novel* was published by E. Butenina in 2013, but it doesn't cover all the necessary issues of the problem. Consequently, we as professors need a certain basis for teaching contemporary multicultural fiction, and should make decisions how to present it according to the current situation.

2. Analytical framework

Multiculturalism is the only possible approach to teaching and studying contemporary American literature. It directly correlates with a postmodern paradigm and the specific features and principles of Postmodernism in fiction. In 2000 M. Tlostanova wrote that Postmodernism was coming to its end (Tlostanova, 2000, p.23), and that was the point of view that dominated in teaching contemporary literature. Now we see that Postmodernism in all its modification is still in power and is developing in various directions. Though, some things announced in Tlostanova's book are true even now. For example, she supposed, that the borders of mainstream in American literature would fade, and gradually the notion of mainstream would disappear, and the authors who were considered to be marginal would be in the center of the researchers' and readers' attention (Tlostanova, 2000, p. 23). We observe this situation today: African American, Native American, Jewish American, Irish American, Chicano/a and other ethnic writers play the most important role in the literary process of the US, and it is impossible to distinguish the borders of mainstream and marginal fiction (Istoriya, 2014). The important conclusion that M. Tlostanova made in her research was that American Multiculturalism could and might be regarded as a particular case of Postmodernism. She pointed out their common sources, such as pluralism and multi-ethnic nature of the society (Tlostanova, 2000, p. 128). Thus, we can see parallels between American and Russian literature. Though, Multiculturalism as a term is not "officially" applied to Russian literature, its essence is the same, as Russia is historically a multi-ethnic country, where various cultural and religious traditions co-exist. The best example for this is the Republic of Tatarstan, where Kazan Federal University is situated. Historically, Kazan is the most northern territory of Islam in the world, and Russian and Orthodox traditions exist together with Tatar and Muslim. Therefore, studying Multicultural situation in the US and literature as a best illustration of it is urgent and important.

Professors face numerous challenges while teaching contemporary literature because the process of its development goes quickly; new authors and books appear, come into fashion or lose their relevance, and the literary canon changes. But we still need a system of teaching and basis for it, as we have when deal with other aspects of literary history and its periods.

Studying Western literature at Russian universities is usually arranged chronologically from Antique times to the present day and includes the literature of Western European countries, the US, and South America. 20th-century and contemporary literature require more time and accuracy of presentation than any other, as it is more various and diverse in artistic methods, themes, problems, and styles (Loshakova & Loshakov, 2010). Usually our BA philological students start dealing with contemporary literature no sooner earlier than at their 3d university year, when they are already familiar with Literary Theory and can distinguish methods, styles and tendencies within different aesthetic systems, such as Realism, Romanticism, Modernism, etc. Thus, the process becomes logical.

3. Research methodology

In this essay, we are presenting the results of the poll held with the students who haven't studied any of contemporary literature, Postmodernism or Multiculturalism yet. It was the main condition according to which we chose the target audience. It was especially interesting for us to know the opinions of the "clean" minds though the notions Multiculturalism and Postmodernism in their most general meanings could be familiar to them. The most important thing for us was that those who took part in the research didn't have professional knowledge of these phenomena. While holding this experiment, we believed that its results would help in teaching Multicultural American Literature.

3.1. Participants and instrument

The target audience consisted of BA students of the 3d, 4th and 5th years of university. They had different majors: English and Literature, English and Oriental Languages, English and Teaching Methods, English and Translation. Nearly 100 students took part in the experiment. We suggested the following questions:

How do you understand the notion Postmodernism?

What is Postmodernism in literature?

How do you understand Multiculturalism?

What is Multiculturalism in literature?

All of the respondents study English as a second Language. The average age was 21.25 years ranging from 19 to 22 years old. The participants varied greatly in terms of experience in learning English and the culture of the English-speaking countries, individual cultural and educational background. The average period of studying English was 12, 36 with a standard deviation 3.03 from the mean.

3.2. Results and findings

3.2.1. Students' opinions on Postmodernism

Analyzing the answers, we could see the main trends and tendencies concerning understanding Postmodernism and Multiculturalism as cultural and literary phenomena.

The most common answers about Postmodernism are the following (according to the frequency of appearance):

Postmodernism is

- tendency in contemporary art / philosophy / culture;
- cultural phenomenon connected with the freedom of expression ideas, technical progress and Hi-Tech;
- something very new / new ideas and approaches to the well-known things;
- presenting ugly things as simple, usual and even attractive;
- decadence;
- I don't know.

Postmodernism in Literature is:

- tendency in contemporary literature, where different ideas already existing are combined / rethinking of the experience;
- fiction about our times and the life of people today;
- play with the reader;
- brave experiments with form;
- the final stage of the Western culture prevalence.

Here we see that the students have general understanding of Postmodernism mainly on the level of intuition, but can't name any specific features of the cultural phenomenon, except that it is something new and modern. Concerning the definition of Postmodernism as "presenting ugly things as simple, usual and even attractive" or calling it "decadence", we suppose that it was formed due to the influence of conservative teachers and professors, whose opinions come from Soviet concept that all non-realistic trends in art were negative and showed degradation

of culture in the world of capitalism. Thus, we still observe the impact of Soviet ideology on contemporary education.

The question about literature turned to be more productive and gave several specific answers concerning Literary Theory, as, for example, “play with the reader”.

The last answer about the Western civilization prevalence, which appeared in several students’ papers, is rather interesting. It shows the specificity of the local cultural situation. Kazan Federal University is situated in the city of Kazan, the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, which is the most northern Muslim region. Therefore, the influence of Islam and Oriental culture is rather strong, and some students who took part in the poll had Oriental Languages and Literature as their major. They are used to compare Western and Oriental paradigms and have an opinion that Postmodernism is mainly a Western phenomenon, but they haven’t studied contemporary Oriental literature yet and are not familiar with Postmodernism in contemporary literature of the Middle East, Turkey, and other countries. On the other hand, the opinion that the Western culture is losing its power is quite popular in mass culture, and many scholars of the older generation see Postmodernism as the main sign of degradation (as we have mentioned above).

The fact that the students mentioned some names of the authors concerning Postmodernism in fiction (Umberto Eco, Victor Pelevin and Tatyana Tolstaya) was very important for us, as it shows their understanding of the literary phenomenon, though sometimes intuitive and lacking theoretical basis. They correctly associated Postmodernism with the works of U. Eco, one of its founders, and V. Pelevin and T. Tolstaya, the most prominent contemporary Russian authors.

3.2.2. Students’ opinions on Multiculturalism

Concerning the opinions about Multiculturalism as a social and cultural phenomenon, the situation with understanding it turned to be more complicated. The answers were the following (according to the frequency of appearance):

- Multiculturalism is:
- combination and reflection of different cultures in one work of art;
- border between two or several cultures;
- I don't know.
- Multiculturalism in Literature is:
- depicting several national and ethnic cultures in one work of fiction;
- combination of different kinds of knowledge and experience in one work of fiction;
- it is connected with American literature;
- mixture of different styles and genres;
- personages of different nationalities in one book;
- I don't know.

Despite the regional specificity, no one mentioned co-existence of different ethnic groups and religions in one society as the most obvious definition of Multiculturalism.

It turned out that Multiculturalism in literature is also not very well understood by the students. The only example of the author was the name of J. Updike mentioned by one of them. This example is not relevant. At the same time, several students mentioned American literature in connection with Multiculturalism, but it became obvious that they couldn’t explain the essence of it.

4. Recommendations

Analyzing the students’ answers we saw that, however, the cultural phenomena of Multiculturalism and Postmodernism were familiar, the respondents could hardly explain how they could be referred to the literature.

The students do not see Postmodernism in literature as an aesthetic system and understand it as a notion synonymous to something contemporary and new. Consequently, we need to explain the characteristic features of Postmodernism in fiction pointing out that they don’t bear negative connotations. We think that it is necessary to present postmodern art, and literature using the same methods that while presenting Romanticism, Realism, and Modernism, and avoid evaluations. To give the students the good and full picture of the development of postmodern

literature we recommend them U. Eco's, J. Barnes's and P. Süskind's novels. Thus, it is possible to present national features of Postmodernism.

As for American literature we acquaint them with it through Multiculturalism and the authors who represent it today. We should take into consideration, that the understanding of Multiculturalism as a social and literary phenomenon is not complete. Knowing the general principles of it, the students see only its multi-national and multi-ethnic constituents. They do not take into consideration such important factors as gender, sexual and social aspects of it. Thus, it is necessary to introduce the authors and fictional works showing these tendencies.

The right selection of books and good teaching of all the aspects of Multiculturalism in contemporary literature will provide better understanding of American culture, and will allow us to make parallels between the peculiarities of Multiculturalism in the US and multi-ethnicity in Russia.

We recommend the works of different representatives of Multicultural American Literature. The obligatory list of books, as we see, should include T. Morrison's novels as the examples of African American literature and Postmodernism; Chicano/a authors (S. Cisneros, R. Anaya); Native American (N. Scott Momaday); Indian American (J. Lahiri); Chinese American (M.H. Kingston, A. Tan); Jewish American (Ph. Roth). To raise the students' interest towards contemporary American literature and to show the current trends in literature we may also recommend J.S. Foer's novels *Everything is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Foer, 2006). They show Postmodernist methods in contemporary fiction and are regarded as belonging to the new period in American fiction, which began on 9/11, and indicates the changes in the worldview and mentality. For those who have a special course of Multiculturalism in literature, we may extend the list of books, and include contemporary authors who present LGBT fiction.

While speculating on the particular works we recommend emphasizing the characteristics typical to racial and ethnic groups, speaking on the problem of identity, and focusing on the artistic devices and methods used by the authors.

5. Conclusion and further discussion

Carrying out this research, we believed that it would help us in teaching Multicultural American Literature in the future. Thus, we made important conclusions and gave the recommendations for the professors dealing with the subject. We believe that our experiment and the conclusions we made will be useful to the teachers who deal with contemporary US literature. Though each country and each educational system has its perspective on the subject, we see that the general tendencies are similar in different nations; therefore sharing the experience is necessary for the professors from different countries.

Acknowledgements

The article is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

References

- Tlostanova, M.V. (2000). Problema multiculturalizma i literatura SShA kontsa XX veka [The multicultural debate and American fiction of the late 20th century]. Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2000.
- Butenina, E.M. (2013). Multiculturalnyy roman SShA [The US multicultural novel]. Moscow: Flinta, 2013.
- Istoriya literatury SShA. (2014). [History of US literature]. Vol.6. / Ed. E. Stetsenko. Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2014.
- Loshakova, T. & Loshakov, A. (2010). Zarubezhnaya literatura XX veka [Foreign literature of the XX century]. Practice book. Moscow: Flinta, 2010.
- Foer, J.S. (2006). *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. N.Y.: Mariner Books, 2006.